

Interims by veausy

Series: [Interludes \[3\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M

Language: English

Characters: Eleven (Stranger Things), Holly Wheeler, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Ted Wheeler

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-02-12

Updated: 2018-02-12

Packaged: 2022-04-21 15:02:56

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 6,764

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

The paper crinkled and Mike shifted, arm sliding slightly so one eye could focus on her. "Thought of something?"

El hummed in the affirmative. His eye closed again and he used one foot to scratch the other ankle, a half-hearted motion that probably did more to amuse El than to rid him of his itch. His foot fell away limply and El stared at the heel of his sock, bright bloody red in contrast to the navy hue everywhere else.

"The color red," she wrote under 'likes.'

Interims

“Kid,” El heard from the kitchen. Her door was propped open, showing the vast living area of the cabin, darkening as the floor led to the small kitchen. Hop’s voice was rough, and his footsteps heavy.

She made eye contact with him as he appeared in her sight, leaning on the jamb. Her pen continued to hover over a sheet of paper, frozen in the midst of her studies but ready to jump back into motion. Sometimes Hop teased her, calling her a self-managing computer, because of how easily she switched between tasks, but he ignored it now in lieu of staring at her balefully.

“Is something wrong?”

Hopper’s hand rose from his waist and rubbed at his brow, a thin bristling sound traveling through the air. “I gotta - we gotta discuss a few things.”

El set her pen down and swiveled in her seat, motioning without any real gestures that her bed was available for him to sit on.

“You know how we’ve been hiding you from the Bad Men?”

El nodded suspiciously.

“Because they pose a threat to you. They’re dangerous and they could take you, and hurt you. You understand?”

El’s eyes widened incredulously, and she nodded despite herself, feeling an itch start up under her skin at how strange Hop was being.

“You understand that other people can hurt you, too? People who never went to the Lab, who never met the Bad Men?”

El tilted her head, one leg crossing over the other. “Like who?”

“Like anyone. The world’s so dangerous, kid, there’s danger everywhere. Left and right. The crap I see every day - it - look, point is: life is very scary and you need to be careful. Do you get that?” His eyes were dark beneath his furrowed brow, chin tilted slightly as it

rested on his knuckles.

“Okay,” El murmured hesitantly, stretched the word into two separate sounds as she observed Hop’s dark expression. “But who’s dangerous?”

“To begin with, all adults. Don’t trust anyone. Adults can lie and cheat and steal, and you won’t even realize. If anyone tells you to go with them or to do something that doesn’t make sense, you find me, all right? You call me or you shout for me, or you run, you do whatever you gotta do to get away. Okay?”

El nodded obediently. Hop sighed, rubbing his fingers through his mustache tersely.

“Or find Mike. I don’t trust the kid much, either, but he’s the lesser of two evils.”

“Mike?” El leaned forward. “Evil?”

Hop’s eyes switched between the two of hers, softer somehow, though his voice was just as gruff when he said, “He’s not evil. But I’d prefer if you came to me first. If I’m not there, find Mike, and have him find me. Can you remember that?”

“I can’t do what Mike says, either?”

Hop’s brow lowered even further, somehow. “Some things. If the kid looks at you with those giant eyes and makes you think of a puppy, he probably isn’t doing anything fishy. Otherwise, you turn tail, you hear?”

“I don’t understand.”

Rubbing at his eyes now, Hop was silent for a while. “Sometimes, kids can pressure each other to do bad things. Now, Mike’s a good kid, and I know that. But he’s a kid. His judgment’s not pristine. You need to be able to protect yourself in all situations. If something he says or does makes you uncomfortable, you ignore who he is and you walk away. Or smack him with your powers. Keep him away, basically. It doesn’t matter that he’s Mike or that you’re friends or that he helps you sometimes, you gotta know to walk away. Do you

think you can?"

Studying the tension of Hop's jaw, El considered it. "But how do I know if he makes me uncomfortable?"

The question threw Hop, who visibly shifted backward. He shook his head in disbelief and huffed a little. "Shit," he muttered. "If there's something that doesn't make sense to you, and the idea of it makes you upset, that's him making you uncomfortable. Nobody should make you uncomfortable, El. That's a hard line you gotta draw. Nobody should make you do what you don't want to do. Now, I'm different - I'm your guardian and I gotta take care of you. I promise never to do anything that is bad for you. And if you ever feel that I'm doing that, you gotta talk to me. This relationship is built on trust and mutual respect. But your friends and your friends' parents? They have no rights on your time or your body. Nod if you understand."

El nodded once, brow furrowed. She leaned back in her seat again, a new haze setting up space in her mind, and watched mutely as Hop stood, running his palms down the sides of his pants, his deep sigh echoing through the room. As he turned to walk back to the kitchen, he ruffled her hair gently, pausing to scratch at her scalp.

"I just want you to be safe. I want you to live a long time."

It was cold, gray, and slushy as El stood at the bus stop. Every car that passed by sent up a spray of muddy water that kept landing closer and closer to her feet, making her edge backwards toward the bench that didn't look any cleaner.

As she finally spotted the tattered blue-gray bus in the distance, her shoulders sagged slightly.

"El?" a voice rang through the thick air suddenly, startling her. Before she even had time to turn, she knew she was going to see Mike. "El, what are you *doing*?"

Shifting her feet slightly, the squelch of her new rain boots drawing Mike's eyes downward, El glanced back at the rapidly approaching

bus. The one other passenger who'd been waiting in the corner of the stop for the last few minutes stood, eyeing them suspiciously and slowly walking to the curb.

"El, seriously, why are you out here?"

"Um," El murmured, voice getting lost in the sound of cars passing by wetly, and her own adrenaline. "I have to go."

"No, wait!" He grabbed her wrist, tugging her back, and El wrenched her hand away, jerking herself a foot apart from him, eyes wide. "El," he started again, gently. "At least tell me where you're going."

The bus was braking, the screech of it reaching their ears as it pulled up along the sidewalk. A new spray of water rose, landing somewhere near the soles of her rubber shoes, and she glanced between the opening door and Mike's pale face. His eyes were wider than she's ever seen them, and the hair he'd grown out was plastered to his face from the rain, droplets cascading down his smooth skin in a strong imitation of tears. He looked panicked.

"I'm going to see my mother."

Mike's mouth moved slightly, opened and closed a couple of times as he blinked and stared at her. "Your *mother*?" El nodded. "You know where to go?"

"I've gone before. It takes two hours."

Mike motioned vaguely to the bus driver, who was watching them with his hand poised on the door button. "Does Hopper know?"

El shook her head slowly, gripping her small bag closer to herself.

"El, you shouldn't ... El ..." Mike took a deep breath, hands brushing his hair up and away from his face, making a wild mess on top of his head, and glanced between El and the road, muddy and bleak as it grew outward into the fog. "I'm coming with you, then."

El shrugged, grabbing his hand, and pulled them through the door.

The ride was mostly silent. The inside of the bus was empty, save for

three seats that housed strange-looking wacky old women, all staring at El and Mike as they made their way down the aisle. After they seated themselves, El stared out of the window as they sped on, and Mike took his time studying their surroundings, the dingy seats beneath them, the emergency door on the ceiling that kept banging open with every bump in the road.

After an hour, Mike finally said, "El, why are you going to see your mom?"

After staring at the wet street a while longer, El turned to him. "She was hurt by the Bad Men." Mike nodded, familiar with the story. "I want to understand, I guess."

"Understand how she was hurt?"

"Mm," she responded noncommittally, eyes roving back to the window. There was a greasy stain right where her eyes were, and she shrank back with disgust. "Hop said that anyone could hurt me, and I won't be able to tell who it is ahead of time. Bad men are everywhere. I just need to understand how it is, once it's happened to you."

Mike swallowed audibly, and she knew his eyes were boring holes through her even though she was turned away. After a silent five minutes, she looked back at him, but he was turned away now, hands piled on his backpack and tendrils of his drying hair waving in the gusts of wind that blew through the bus every so often. His coat was still wet, muddy, and she realized belatedly that he must have just come from school, on his way home. Something warm spread through her chest, and she reached a hand out, twining it with his cold one.

He watched her warily, but a smile from her made one tug at his own lips instantly.

After another five minutes, her head was pillowed comfortably on his bony shoulder, and they sat like that for the rest of the trip, eyes locked on different windows but breaths in sync.

“How old are you, Elle?”

El could always hear the extra letters people added to her name. They probably thought it would be more comfortable for her with them tacked on, but it seemed more than anything like they were doing it to assuage their own discomfort with the *Eleven* they saw printed before their eyes.

Looking away from the clipboard the doctor was clasping between the two of them, El cleared her throat gently. “Fifteen and one month.”

Hopper was a looming presence in the corner, leaning against the wall and holding both of their coats in front of him, adding to his girth with the dark blues and greens. His lips were pursed oddly, shadows under his eyes. El found it hard to pull her gaze away.

“And you have yet to experience menstruation?”

El blinked.

“Elle?”

Hopper cleared his throat, pulling both of their eyes to him. “Yes, she has yet to.”

El blinked at him. “What is - “

“Listen to the doctor, El,” he responded with a mumble, eyes lost in the invisible lint he was pulling off her coat now.

Doctor Carmel smiled at her gently, thick locks of black hair falling around her face and shining in the overhead light. “How are you eating, El?”

El shrugged. “Okay?”

Doctor Carmel chuckled and glanced quickly at Hop, who smiled back tensely.

“Are you experiencing any severe stress? Are you exercising intensely? Taking any medication?”

El shook her head, hands tucked around and under her thighs. The paper sheet they'd sat her on kept crinkling every time she swung her feet, but she felt restless with the smell of something chemical and lifeless stuck in her nose. It was too much like the Lab.

Hopper sensed her discomfort, but shook his head minutely to signal that she stop fidgeting every time he heard the crinkle, too.

"Hmm," Doctor Carmel hummed, making notes on her clipboard quickly. Her black-rimmed glasses slipped to the end of her nose, magnifying her face strangely, and El studied the view curiously. "Well, the blood tests from last month don't show any hormonal abnormalities that would make us infer any congenital problems," the doctor murmured, head turned in Hop's direction as she read over her notes. "Since we don't know what kinds of medication she was plied with in her childhood, anything is possible, I suppose - but I'd wager a guess she's just got a case of delayed development, a kind of - stunted growth. Nothing to scoff at, surely," she nodded at Hop and El each, seriously. "But nothing that can't be fixed."

Hop nodded, some relief evident on his face, and watched as the doctor turned to scribble something on a smaller paper.

"This is a prescription for some multivitamins. The dose will be strong for the first few weeks and taper off as time goes on. Three a day, one at every meal. Make sure you don't take them on an empty stomach. I'd like to have her in here once a month to keep a check on her progress."

Hop nodded again, enthusiastic like he never usually was.

Doctor Carmel turned back to El and rubbed a hand softly over El's shoulder. "Don't worry, Elle. We'll get your body the nutrients it needs, and you'll get your period in no time."

Period. El knew that word, Max had brought it up several times. *Period, period.* She was supposed to have one, but she didn't. When she looked up, Hop was avoiding her gaze uneasily, and conversing in low tones with the doctor, whose hands were tucked now into the large pockets of her white coat. She looked so little like Papa - but yet so much like him, too.

When they walked out of the harsh-smelling building some time later, El looked up at Hopper again. "What's a period?"

He sighed, eyes lifting skyward. "It's - women are - I'll have Joyce explain it to you." As they reached his car, he went on, "What's important is, you're developing slower than the other kids, El. You're weaker. That doesn't mean you couldn't take all of them in a fight, combined, I know you could, but you have to be careful and protective of yourself. You're malnourished. The shitty microwaveable meals I've been having us eat were a curse, you're underdeveloped and you're behind your peers. We're fixing your diet, we're taking these vitamins, and we're starting a strict sleep schedule. I know these kids might be going wild and trying new things, but you need to cherish your health and put yourself first. Don't drink with them, don't try anything I haven't let you drink or eat before. No smoking. And definitely no sex. Capiche?"

El blushed and looked away, Max's colorful stories echoing in her head. "Capiche."

Hop grunted his approval and his hand lifted the handle of the passenger door of the truck. "Hop in. Come on, we don't have all day."

After Doctor Carmel came Doctor Heath, a psychiatrist. Hop's panic about "screwing with this little girl's wellbeing" only grew in the weeks after El's diagnosis, and now El reported to Doctor Heath every Thursday for two hours.

This week's homework was making a list of her likes and dislikes.

So she sat, crosslegged and slouched on Mike's dad's armchair, one hand holding a college-ruled sheet of paper and the other holding a purple crayon. Holly was cooing something at her dolls a few feet away, honey-colored hair swishing over her back as she positioned them around the coffee table. Mike was sprawled on the floor like a starfish, three limbs spread out around him and one forearm resting over his eyes as he dozed.

The air outside was crisp and thin, the white snow making it feel cleaner somehow. El could hear Karen in another room, mumbling into the telephone as she painted her nails. The smell of the polish was so strong, El was almost willing to brave the cold to air it out.

Nodding to herself, El scrawled *nail polish* in the 'dislikes' column carefully, her handwriting slowly evolving to look more like Nancy's and less like Dustin's.

The paper crinkled and Mike shifted, arm sliding slightly so one eye could focus on her. "Thought of something?"

El hummed in the affirmative. His eye closed again and he used one foot to scratch the other ankle, a half-hearted motion that probably did more to amuse El than to rid him of his itch. His foot fell away limply and El stared at the heel of his sock, bright bloody red in contrast to the navy hue everywhere else.

The color red, she wrote under 'likes.'

Holly squealed suddenly, thudding one doll down the wooden table toward a pile of other dolls, and continued muttering something to them as she smashed them together.

El felt her eyes relax as they froze somewhere on Holly's shirt, traveling to that place inside her that she'd been familiar with during her stay at the Lab, but which she'd needed less and less of the longer she was in Hawkins. Comfortable dissociating with the scene around her now, she wandered in that void, dark and soft and safe, and watched what her eyes could see as though through a screen, distant and a bit muted.

Mike was still prominent, the large lanky shape of him taking up most of her vision, as well as her days, but it was warm and not imposing. With so little daylight during the winter months, Karen was fond of lighting candles around the house to add holiday scents and create a celebratory atmosphere, and a sudden whiff of fir hit El's nose, rousing her from her trance.

El glanced sideways at the candle, nearing the end of its life as it clung to the last of its wick. She sniffed, drawing more of the woodsy

smell into her nose, and tilted her head, considering.

Pine candles, she scrawled carefully in the 'likes' column.

Drawing inspiration from her senses, El sat up and glanced carefully around the room. In the corner was a gold-tipped poker set, glinting lustrously in the dim light. Beside it was the rich and sizable fireplace, burning brightly and emanating a heat that reached El's toes and probably was the only reason Mike had been able to lie on the ground. On top of the mantle were lines of photos of the Wheelers, the earliest from before Nancy was born and the most recent from two months ago; Mike had an arm wrapped loosely around El's shoulder and neck, resting his chin on her other shoulder, as they stood carefully framing Terry Ives reclining in her chair, absent in all ways from the moment, but memorialized in a way that meant a lot to El.

El stood and tiptoed over, brushing a hand gently down the glass of the frame. Her and Mike's visits to Terry were a weekly adventure now, always supervised by Hopper after Mike forced El to confess to him, but permissible nonetheless.

She trailed her fingers along the mantle to the other candle in the room, unlit. *Carrie's Christmas Candles*, read the top of the label. At the bottom, the curly font announced, *Gingerbread*. El removed the lid and sniffed it carefully. After a brief consideration, she scribbled, *gingerbread candles*.

Mike's voice was croaky and deep when he mumbled, "You liked that linen-scented one in Nancy's room, too."

El swiveled, looking at him. His arm was still slung over his face, and he looked, for all the world, like he was out, but his other hand gave him away. The nail of his forefinger was tugging almost imperceptibly at the skin of his thumb, letting El know he was fully awake and observing her.

Hands on her hips, she frowned. "Are you chaperoning me?"

His arm slid off his face immediately, and he sat up. "No! I just - I can't fall asleep, and I heard you moving around ..."

Glaring at him a second longer, she finally let her smile crease her cheeks when she bounded over and crouched beside him. *Linen candles*, she jotted down, making sure he was watching.

After a second, she sat up and pecked him gently on the mouth. As their lips separated, Mike's hand wound around her neck and kept her from moving further, leaving them breathing the same air. He leaned in again, ghosting the skin of his lips over hers for a few teasing seconds before trapping her top lip between both of his. They explored each other's mouths eagerly, the heat of the fireplace melting them into each other, until suddenly Holly squealed again, whispering to her dolls, and they froze with their lips glued together. When they parted, it was with a wet sound that left both their cheeks pink, but they had trouble breaking eye contact. Finally pulling away, El set the paper on his thigh and wrote, *Mike*.

—

The snow was starting to melt by the time the whole gang had a chance to go sledding. In a last-ditch effort to make use of the layers of untouched snow in the empty area behind his house, Lucas invited everyone to bring their own sleds - "or whatever" - on a cold Saturday morning in February.

El and Mike were the first ones there, trudging around the side of the house into the backyard and around the fence instead of bothering Lucas's family, and they set up camp near a patch of shrubbery where they were hidden from the house, Mike sitting on his sled and El sitting on his lap. Their overalls made a lot of noise as the insulated material rubbed together, but it seemed like the only sound around for miles, and their voices felt small in the winter air, almost like they were whispering into cloth.

The sky was off-white, one solid color from horizon to horizon, broken up only by the dry and shriveled branches of sleeping trees. As El stared at them, she felt Mike staring at her, and her cheeks heated. "Quit it," she swatted at him.

"You have freckles," he explained.

El's gloved hand came up to half-cover, half-rest on her face. "No, I

don't."

He pointed one wool finger vaguely in the direction of her cheek. "I swear!"

El hid her cheek with her hand, giggling, and tucked her face into his scarf. His hand came up over the pom-pom of her hat and held her there, a deeper, richer laugh coming from his chest. The sound of his voice always sent goosebumps down her arms. She snuggled deeper into his neck.

After some times spent in silence conserving their body heat, they moved apart at the sound of crunching snow and low murmurs. Max and Lucas appeared from around the shrubs, holding hands and smiling at each other.

"Wanna race before the others get here?"

Mike scoffed, acting superior for no real reason as he hefted El between his legs and positioned them to take off. Max watched him with a zest in her eyes, manhandling Lucas behind her as the competitive tension amped up, and soon they were speeding down the small slope into the valley between several backyards. The whole venture was moot, since Max and Lucas's sled veered off to the side and stopped abruptly in an empty clearing, and Mike and El flipped over a small bump in the grass and landed roughly with their limbs tangled and snow edging up their shirts and down their collars.

Several shaky exhales and wheezes later, El opened her eyes to find Mike poised above her, his eyes wide with concern. "Are you hurt?"

Testing each of her limbs in turn, El squinted up at him. "No. You?"

Huffing a breathless laugh, he slid slightly to the side, some of his weight still covering her in a way that was comforting. "Just my pride." His raised a hand to wave half-heartedly at the whooping and mocking noises coming from the other side of the clearing, and nodded at their friends with a face.

One of Mike's hands was near El's hip, holding up most of his weight, and he sat on his side between her splayed legs, using his free hand

to brush snow off his jacket. Eventually, his hand started to brush snow off her, too, and El grasped his wrist loosely, holding it against her chest.

Mike's eyes roved over her face erratically, from her mouth to her eyes to her nose to her cheeks, just going in circles until she whispered, "Mike."

She couldn't hear Max or Lucas anymore, assumed that they'd wandered back up to the top of the hill for round two, but she couldn't find the desire to move for the moment. She pulled on Mike's wrist a little, seeing if it would give, and he tilted forward slightly, covering her torso with his weight. It didn't feel as suffocating as she thought.

His weight rested on his elbows now, on two sides of her head, and he held his head up high to stare down at her. El rolled her eyes. "Kiss me, numbskull."

The haze that started in Mike's eyes at the first two words froze and dissipated as he laughed. "*Numbskull?*"

El stared at his mouth, parted perfectly around his straight white teeth, the shape of it like a heart beaming straight at her. "Max calls you that sometimes. I thought it sounded right for the moment."

"It's really not that romantic to talk about Max and her nicknames for me when we're about to kiss."

El exhaled sharply, turning narrow eyes on him. "Oh, do tell me how to make this more romantic."

"You could flutter your eyes a bit more, like girls do in movies. Maybe look a little impressed by everything I do for the next few minutes."

El released his wrist, trailing a wet glove down Mike's cold, reddened cheek. She stopped at his lips and fluttered her eyes up to meet his. "You look so handsome like this, Mike. All frostbitten and hypothermic above me."

He grinned. "Pulling out some SAT words; impressive, but also not

very romantic.”

El drove her hand up, over the swell of Mike’s nose and the smooth plane of his forehead, brushing the escaped strands of his hair back into his hat and tucking the thing lower over his ears. “What if I tell you something nice?”

Shaking his head cockily, Mike glanced up to where the others must have been, their voices carrying slightly over the slope, but tilted his head as he met her eyes again. “Depends how nice.”

El bunched two hands in his lapels and pulled him down hard, until their bodies were lined up from top to bottom, foreheads touching and breaths mingling in the cold air. Her gloves settled on the back of Mike’s head as she held their faces together and their noses rubbed against one another warmly.

“I really ...” she whispered quietly into the space between them, losing her nerve but pushing ahead as she felt Mike’s arms come to cradle her head from the snow. *I love you*, her mind whispered. Its voice was louder now, shouting at her sometimes with the force of the feeling. *I really love you*. “I really like you, Mike Wheeler.”

Mike sobered, studying her in silence and shaking his head in disbelief, before he dove down and swallowed the air that rushed out of her.

—

Mike helped El with her homework, and in return Hopper fed him free dinners three times a week when he stayed over. As time went on, there was little real tutoring for Mike to do, since El became adept at keeping pace with the teachers and generally had no trouble understanding the material, but Hopper let them keep working together as long as it looked like it was doing El some good and they weren’t just goofing off aimlessly.

If Hopper ran late at the station, they usually waited for him to arrive before they ordered a pizza for all three and ate it in front of the television.

Tonight was such a night, and by the time it hit eight o'clock, Mike was yawning into his elbow and El's eyes were drooping weakly, so she methodically placed all their papers and textbooks in separate piles and cleaned up her desk while Mike sat watching her with a dazed look in his eyes. After returning her room to some semblance of order, El pulled him up by the hand and lay them both on the couch under two blankets, the tinny sound of a rerun washing over them in the dark.

It was still dark when she woke up, and Hopper was still not there. The rerun had transitioned into nine o'clock news, and she lay with her head on Mike's chest for a while, letting his breathing shift her up and down as her gaze slowly focused on the journalist rattling off some news story.

Mike's heart was beating loudly, but slowly, right up against El's ear, and El looked down at Mike's shirt, almost believing she could see it through the thin layers of skin and bone that separated them. Placing her head back down, she continued to listen to the routine thuds, trying to make her own heartbeat synchronize. It didn't.

After another few minutes of staring dumbly at the TV, El shifted upward a little, fitting her head under Mike's chin and staring at his Adam's apple in the dim light streaming in from the entryway. Mike stayed asleep but responded to her motion, turning toward her slightly and using his arms to pull her closer to him. El cooperated, smiling into his skin, and shifted with him until she felt something push against her thigh, unfamiliar. She gasped and pulled back.

Mike's eyes opened, bleary. "El?" El pushed at the blankets, shoving them up and back, trying to see what was touching her - or if someone was in the room - when Mike stilled her hands with his own. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Something touched me," El said, her voice tense, still fighting with the blankets as she freed herself from Mike's grasp. He sat up with her, looking around the couch suspiciously and reaching for the lamp on the side table, switching it on.

The light blinded them both for a moment, but finally, El succeeded in pushing all the covers off and was faced with the obvious bulge in

Mike's pants. She stared, the silence thick around them, as Mike sat frozen, staring at himself with her. Finally, she looked at him, and his cheeks flooded with red, knees pulling up to hide himself from her and hands rising to cover his face. He groaned weakly into his palms.

"Mike?" El said slowly.

After some nonsensical grumbling and quiet wailing, he responded with a garbled, "Mreah?"

El took his hands and pulled them down, shifting to get a better look at him, but Mike had turned his whole body away and was practically crawling over the arm of the couch to get away. El laughed, "Mike, come on," as she pulled him back toward her. His face was redder than she'd ever seen it, his eyes barely meeting hers for a second before darting away. "What, um - what - ?"

"I can't control it, it happens sometimes when I sleep, I really didn't mean to, I'm sorry - "

"Mike, Mike, calm down," El cut him off, one hand cradling his jaw and the other pulling his knees back around so he could sit comfortably. "It's a, an erection?"

Mike nodded miserably, the word making him squeeze his eyes shut.

"Stop doing that," she cajoled, brushing a hand up his heated cheek and through his wild hair, scratching his scalp gently. "It's just me."

When Mike finally looked at her, he nodded slightly, the tension in his shoulders still visible, but the color starting to face from his skin. El took advantage of his pliable state and shifted them back around into the positions they'd been napping in, dragging the blankets back over both their forms. Mike looked like he was ready to scoot to the very edge of the cushions to avoid touching her, but El hauled him back, bodily wrapping his arm around her waist and digging her face into the skin of his neck, inhaling.

Hop's words from months before came to her mind, unbidden, and she pushed them away with amusement. Mike would rather fall onto the wooden floor of the cabin and melt through it out of sheer

embarrassment than make El uncomfortable.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and Will stayed behind for AV Club. El had no serious interest in the matter, and Max's stepdad had banned her from after school activities for reasons only Lucas seemed to know, so usually El biked to Mike's and sat in the basement doing her homework as she waited for him.

She'd gone up to his bedroom twice, but it felt empty without him and devoid of warmth, so she avoided doing so when she could.

As she wandered into the kitchen to grab a cookie from the counter, she came face to face with Ted, who was bent over a newspaper and chewing on the earpiece of his glasses.

"Hi, Mr. Wheeler," El said carefully. She didn't know the man very well, but Mike was always tense when it came to his dad, and she felt tense by association.

"Hey, Jane," Ted rumbled back, barely acknowledging her with his gaze before going back to the classifieds. "Good day at school?"

"It was fine," she allowed, cookie getting a bit greasy in her clammy hands, and she started edging back out of the kitchen slowly.

"Do me a favor, will ya? Bring me the hot glue gun Mike borrowed from me. He's probably stashed it somewhere in his room, but I can't be bothered to go through the heaps of crap he's got all over his floor."

El's brow furrowed, picturing Mike's room in her mind and never remembering any heaps of anything on his floor, but she nodded anyway, taking the opportunity to walk out briskly.

The door of Mike's room was open a crack, the late afternoon light streaming through his window and falling into the hallway. As expected, the floor was devoid of heaps of crap, and the only things she sees littering it were one lone sock and his walkie-talkie, discarded probably during last night's chat with the boys. She picked it up and placed it carefully on his desk, and then glances around for

what she imagined a hot glue gun would look like.

After about fifteen minutes of looking, she didn't find it, but she found a large machine under Mike's bed that was similar to ones she'd seen from a distance at the school, old and dusty. She pulled it closer to herself on the floor and was surprised to see a thin leaf of paper flutter with it, grasped tightly in its mechanisms.

She saw letters on buttons and hesitantly pressed the *M*, watching something jump up and stamp an identical *M* on the paper. She did it again, watching the little hand jump up again and lie back down. She tried a few more letters until she had a neat row of *mm mik wheel er* stamped over the creamy sheet of paper. There was still space before the edge, so she sat and stared at the buttons, trying to work up the courage.

Finally, she took a quick breath and smashed her fingers over the letters, letting out a sharp squeak as the last hand fell down. With her eyes wide, she stared at what she'd typed for a long time, before she quickly stood and shoved the big machine back into the darkest corner under Mike's bed, the creamy *i love you mike wheeler* fluttering into the dark with it.

—

"El, what are you wearing?" Max said hesitantly. "And why is it so big?"

El glanced down at her oversize sweater. "It's Mike's." The cheerful sun of March was finally warming up the air of Hawkins, and today was the first day El had been able to wander outside without a coat on over her clothes. The tight jeans she had on underneath were hand-me-downs from Nancy, but El was turning out to be taller than most girls her age and even older, so her clothes didn't seem to look quite the way they were expected to.

Max nodded skeptically. "Okay, but why? It's too big for you."

El glanced down again and back up at her friend, lost. "It is?"

"You see the way the sleeves are hanging a good six inches over your

fingers, right?”

El pulled her sleeves up, watching them swing loosely, and shrugged. “It’s soft, though. And Mike really likes this sweater.”

“El, when’s the last time you’ve gone shopping?”

“Yester -“

“For clothes?”

El thought. “In September, when we were buying school supplies.”

Max rolled her eyes. “I swear, Hop is hopeless. You and I are going shopping this weekend. You can’t keep looking like a drowned rat at school.”

El frowned. “I do not.”

“Okay, not a drowned rat. A rat who’s going through a hard time, maybe lost his job. You’re skinny because you’re so tall, and all your clothes just kind of swing off you like you’re a clothes hanger. Do you have any sense of your taste?”

“My taste?”

Soft footfalls approached them and stopped just behind El, Mike’s kiss landing on the crown of her head as he joined them at their lunch table. “S’going on?”

“I’m telling El she needs better clothes. Why are you letting her go out like this?”

Mike glanced at El’s clothes and then turned a mildly offended face toward Max, pulling a paper bag out of his backpack. “*Letting* her?”

Max pointed wordlessly to El’s ensemble. “Your clothes are not an appropriate stand-in for El’s own wardrobe. Why is nobody else concerned about this?”

Mike glanced back at El, giving her a once-over. “I think she looks fine. It’s Hawkins. We’re not modeling for Vogue.”

Groaning into her hands, Max ignored them for the next few minutes until Lucas showed up and swung an arm around her shoulders. "Lucas, do you like my fashion sense?"

Lucas looked attentively at Max's tight wool dress and stockings, and twitched his eyebrows lewdly. "Brother, do I."

Max splayed her hand over his chin, turning it back to his lunch, and rolled her eyes. "El, don't you own any dresses?"

"No," El answered automatically. "I only wore one back in '83."

"How come you don't have any? You don't like them?"

El glanced at Mike, who was busily chewing his sandwich and otherwise paying no attention to the conversation, scribbling something in his textbook as he did his homework last-minute. "I just - I just have things that the Wheelers gave me."

"Well, you can always get other things. Tell me what you like, do you like skirts and dresses?"

Another unsure glance at Mike didn't help El to figure out her answer. He was staring at his pre-calculus notes and deaf to the world, even his sandwich lying forgotten on its napkin. "I don't know."

"How about, like, tights and pantyhose?"

El glanced at Mike, hopeless, but he had his nose scrunched up in a way she usually found cute but was currently causing her whole dilemma.

"Why do you keep looking at Mike?"

At this, he finally glanced up, confusion on his face as he glanced between the two girls.

El swallowed. "I kind of just wear what Mike likes." Max and Lucas stared at her. Mike was looking at her, too, but it felt less obtrusive. Self-conscious, El said flatly, "What."

“El, do you not wear things that you think I won’t like?”

El glanced at Mike’s genuinely concerned expression and shook her head. “I just like wearing what I know you like. You like this sweater, so I wear it.”

“I can like other things, too? But you shouldn’t wear things that I like, just because I like them. You should be wearing what you like.”

El shifted, uncomfortable. Here came the part where she finally outed herself as the freak that she’d been trying not to be for two years. “I never wore clothes ... before. And I still don’t really notice them, unless they get in the way. So I don’t really care about them. If that makes sense? I just - I’m okay with wearing what you like.”

Mike nodded at her simply, glanced at Max tiredly, and went back to his textbook, taking another bite out of his sandwich.

Max’s eyes looked very soft when they met El’s, and she tucked herself around Lucas for the rest of their lunch period.

Author's Note:

Took an extended writer's block from my productivity. Got mad. Took an extended break from my writer's block. Not feeling much better.

Fluff heals all wounds, though, and I welcome your interaction and feedback!